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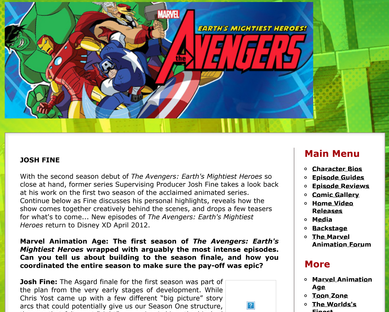

JOSH FINE

With the second season debut of *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* so close at hand, former series Supervising Producer Josh Fine takes a look back at his work on the first two season of the acclaimed animated series. Continue below as Fine discusses his personal highlights, reveals how the show comes together creatively behind the scenes, and drops a few teasers for what's to come... New episodes of *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* return to Disney XD April 2012.

Marvel Animation Age: The first season of *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* wrapped with arguably the most intense episodes. Can you tell us about building to the season finale, and how you coordinated the entire season to make sure the pay-off was epic?

Josh Fine: The Asgard finale for the first season was part of the plan from the very early stages of development. While Chris Yost came up with a few different "big picture" story arcs that could potentially give us our Season One structure, the one that felt most "right" was using Loki as the big-bad that ultimately is revealed to have been the cause of the Avengers' formation (just like in the comics). We also knew that we were going to do the Masters of Evil in Season One — kind of a no-brainer really. You've got a team of the mightiest heroes in the Marvel Universe coming to together to save the world, how can you *not* do the team-up of all their most evil villains? Especially given how when the Masters came into play in the comics, we just knew that was somewhere we wanted to go. Who would be on that team and how they would come together didn't come until later however.

Once we got closer to planning the season finale, and once we knew that the Masters and Loki were tied to each other, it became clear that we'd want to work them into our Asgard storyline. As we got late in the season, the Avengers had already been up against so much — Graviton, the Leader, Kang, the Masters of Evil — and they'd prevailed as a team against all of them. In trying to figure out how to up the stakes yet again, we asked ourselves 'okay, what if we take their greatest asset - The fact that they're *a team*?' The story of the first 13 episodes of the season is about members of the team coming together, of the Avengers being formed to face the foes that no single hero could deal with. The story of the second half of the season is really about these guys learning to work together; to actually *be* a team, not just be on a team. So now that they've gotten this whole team thing down... let's take that away from them.

All of a sudden the Avengers find themselves going one on one against some of their worst enemies — and then pulled across time and space into different dimensions from one another. Now they're on their own *and* not on Earth anymore. How mighty are they now?

Working on this finale was a lot of fun. It's one of those things where once you get started all the pieces start falling into place naturally — that's usually a sign that you're on the right track. One interesting factoid: we really wanted to send each of the Avengers to the Realm that would be the best fit / most relevant to them (i.e., Giant Man vs. Frost Giants in Jotunheim, Cap facing the ghosts of his past in Niffleheim, Iron Man working in a Dwarven forge in Nidavellir, etc.) I was worried though about everything lining up and feeling too convenient, which is one of the reasons why the Avengers don't face off with their equal/opposite Master of Evil in episode 24. The Avengers are dispatched to 7 different locations on Earth to track down the Norn Stones—they have no way of knowing what they're going to find there or who they're going to be facing off with. I wanted to make sure we captured some of that randomness by trying to come up with mis-matches—like Wasp vs. Abomination. This ended up being a lot of fun actually, as we'd often seen each hero face off with their own nemesis previously, but seeing them take on someone that they wouldn't normally be facing created some dynamic fight situations.

MAA: The fan response to the first season was tremendous, especially with the cliffhanger finale. Was there any worry about making sure you met fan expectations while staying true with what you wanted to do for the first season?

JF: I'm not sure *worry* is the right word, but certainly anxiety. The thing is — I don't think meeting fan expectations and "what I wanted to do for the first season" were two conflicting goals. In fact, meeting and exceeding fan expectations was *exactly* what I wanted to do for the first season... actually doing it on the other hand is not always the easiest. There are also always a bunch of other conflicting goals that tend to get in the way of that, things like budget and schedule, and that at the end of the day, this needed to be a show that worked for kids (I know, I know... most fans don't like to hear that their show was made for kids and not for them.) I've always been a believer in the idea that you don't need to dumb things down to make a show for kids, and that making a show for kids and a show for adult fans don't have to be mutually exclusive acts. I'm basically an eight year-old boy at heart, so I have this advantage of just being able to make a show that I like — that I would want to watch — and knowing that the kid in me is going to come through.

I'll add that this is not an easy medium to work in. To put it simply... there are a lot of cooks in the kitchen. As a creator, if it were as simple as sitting down and making your whole vision appear spontaneously out of a void into a final product, I think you'd see a much higher density of good quality TV and Film out there. But vision and creativity are only a small part of the total puzzle — a critical one to be sure — but knowing what you want to do and getting it done are two vastly different things. On *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* we had writers and directors and designers and storyboard artists, music composers, sound effects designers, mixers, editors, each bringing their own ideas and their own visions to the table. Part of producing is juggling all of these ideas and personalities and trying to weave them into the overall tapestry of the show. And it's not always as simple as just pointing to someone's idea and saying "this is wrong" or "this is right." Sometimes "this" is just different than what you'd initially thought of and you have to know when to embrace it and when it will create problems down the road. One of the tricky things about working with artists is that they need to feel invested in the project to really produce their best work. If you're constantly telling them "no, do it my way!" their enthusiasm is going to ebb. They're not going to feel like they're contributing creatively to the process and as a result the overall work is going to suffer. One of the hardest things about producing for TV is learning how to compromise your vision with other artists without *compromising* your vision.

And outside of the challenges of working within a team, you've got everyone from licensing, to toymakers, to broadcasters, to overall Marvel long-term planning types who all may have different opinions on what the show needs to do and needs to be. And never mind just different opinions from you, sometimes different opinions from each other! So... all of that is to say, there was no worry that trying to make fans happy was going to conflict with what we were trying to do. But there was a great deal of anxiety that after pleasing all of the various minds involved — and getting things done within the budget and schedule that we had — that we could still let the fans down. And even seeing Season One episodes as we started to finish them — and knowing that they were turning out (in my opinion) good, you still hold your breath until that initial fan reaction. When the micro-episodes finally started going up and folks were gobbling them up and craving more, that's when I knew that we'd accomplished our goal.

MAA: With the first season completely aired, and also available on DVD and for download, are there any specific memories - either in the episodes or behind the scenes - that stick out for you?

JF: So very many. This show means so much to me. Everything from the very first meetings in development to the airings of the first episodes to fan feedback on the last episode of Season One is pretty unforgettable.

A few of my favorites (from both seasons, as a lot of the work overlapped):

Reading the script for "Breakout, Part One" right after Chris finished it. This was probably the best single episode script I'd ever read. All of the work we'd done up until that point just came together so beautifully.

-Sitting with Ciro Nieli late one night as he sketched out a design for Gamma-Irradiated Wasp in "Gamma World" and colored her in with markers. We do so much work on computers these days, it was cool to see this character design come to life with pen and paper.

-Looking at the first round of finished backgrounds designed and painted by Gary and Nadia Mouri respectively. A lot of people don't notice the backgrounds when watching cartoons, but some of the backgrounds in this show are just stunningly beautiful. The painting of Hank Pym's entomology lab is one of my favorites from the early episodes.

-Going through character and prop coloring with colorist Kim Bitsui every week (usually late at night) and giving her a hard time on almost every single design, just for fun.

-Having goose bumps run up my spine when we first got the whole Avengers voice cast in the recording studio together (we'd had them in individually for their micro episodes.) Actually hearing these characters talk to each other was as cool in that moment as it's ever been.

-Geeking out over the Season Two character design for Ms. Marvel from character designer Tom Perkins.

-Watching the animation for the first episode with the entire team when it came back from the overseas animation studio.

-Listening to the music for episode 31 in Season Two. One of my favorite episodes of the whole series and some of the best music as well. Composer Guy Michelmore continued to outdo himself with every subsequent episode.

-Mixing episode 13 with Mike Draghi and the rest of our amazing sound team. One of my favorite finished episodes of Season One.

-Laughing with Supervising Director Frank Paur and editors George Rizkallah and Jonathan Polk over a particularly humorous (and crude) animation gaffe in a Season Two episode (hey, they happen! Don't worry... we fixed it.)

MAA: And now we move on to the second season of *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes*. The second season is set to debut in 2012 on Disney XD. What can fans expect to see as the season gears up? Will the show pick up right off from the cliffhanger finale?

JF: The show does pick up pretty soon after the finale of Season One. We structured it in such a way as to bring folks up to speed with what's going on, even if they haven't seen the first season, but loyal viewers won't have to wait long for some old plot-threads to be renewed. Fans will get loads of new guest stars and return appearances right from the get-go. I know it seems hard to imagine, but Season Two gets even bigger than Season One. What's also neat is that we take the time to go smaller too. I know some fans have been craving smaller, more personal episodes for some of the characters and we go there. In fact, the "smallest" episode we do is perhaps my favorite of the whole season.

MAA: Since some of the second season episodes are reportedly based directly from Marvel Comic book events, will comic readers have a leg up on guessing how the season (and even the first season cliffhanger) will unfold?

JF: Chris [Yost] is particularly good at writing in a way that makes everything feel familiar to long time fans and inspired by the comics and yet... we work in just enough surprises and curve balls, modify things in enough of a way that you won't see what's coming (hopefully). Our fans are pretty clever — and surprisingly good at predicting events sometimes — but I think we'll still have everyone on the edge of their seats in Season Two.

MAA: You worked on the first half of season two before the show was handed over to Man of Action, is that correct? What type of initiatives or changes will fans notice when the new creative takes over for the second half of the season? How far along were you involved in the show's second season production before leaving?

JF: I remained the Supervising Producer through all of scripting, pre-production, and the first half of post-production. The episodes weren't all animated in chronological order, so I was there for the entirety of the first 13 episodes of the season and for a few scattered episodes towards the end of the season. I was there for everything except post-production for the rest of the episodes (about eight of them.)

When Chris Yost and I started developing the first season of the show, we came up with a detailed plan for Season One and a rough idea of where we would go in future seasons — creating a bible for the show that set up a road map of where the adventures of the Avengers would take them. We stayed pretty true to that plan throughout Season One, though not slavishly. As with any good serial storytelling, sometimes you realize that the plot is pulling you in a different direction than you initially predicted or that one character is developing a bit differently than you expected. Sometimes you find relationships and friendships between characters popping up that you want to explore more that you didn't know were going to be there when you first started planning. Sometimes you have plans for an episode or two that never quite fit into the overall story, so it gets pushed off until a future season. At the beginning of Season Two we did something similar. We sat down and hashed out a detailed road-map of what we wanted to do in the season, what the characters were going to go through and how they were going to change. And we came up with some rough ideas of where we'd end up and what we could do if we got future seasons. Chris went ahead and created a "mini-bible" for the season that really organized these thoughts in one place.

Everyone was on-board with our plan for Season Two and we set out to make it happen. We got a little past halfway through scripting the season when a few things happened at once. The first was that both writing and production were starting to slip a bit behind schedule (not abnormal for a show of this scope, but not desirable all the same), the second was that Chris was offered a tremendous opportunity to join the Marvel writer's program for the feature film division, and we started exploring ways to transition him off the series to free him up. The above two things caused a period of increased scrutiny on the show and the feeling arose that the storytelling was leaning a bit too much in the serial direction—that it might be growing too hard to follow for anyone who hadn't seen the first 39 episodes—and that the focus was drifting too much from the "big four" Avengers (Iron Man, Cap, Thor, and Hulk.)

Jeph Loeb, who had recently joined as head of TV for us suggested bringing in [the Development/ Production team] Man of Action to help solve a bunch of these issues. The Man of Action guys came in for a bunch of really productive story meetings and helped get us back on schedule by taking on a bunch of the writing work load. Chris and I remained involved in the planning process, but credit really goes to Jeph and MoA for crafting the new road-map for those 13 episodes and for bringing renewed focus to the 'big four' in more one-and-done style stories. Within that new plan, Chris spared time to pen a few more scripts for us and I supervised production throughout. We tried to make any shift as invisible as possible, so hopefully — if things worked out — long time fans won't notice any difference at all.

MAA: Out of what you've seen and worked on, can you tease any surprises for the second season of *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes*?

JF: There's fallout from the finale episodes of Season One that a lot of people probably aren't expecting. I know that's intensely ambiguous, but that's all I want to say for now. You'll just have to wait until April!

Also, are you aware that there's an alien space raccoon with automatic weapons in this season? How can it not be great?!

MAA: In addition to your work on *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes*, where else will be see your name? Any comic, animation, or other projects you can hint at for fans?

JF: Nothing that I can talk about yet, but I'm keeping busy. (I'm also playing a lot of *Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3* — a great fix for anyone looking to pass the time until April.) Follow me on twitter @Josh_Fine for up-to-the-second ambiguous updates on what I'll be doing next!

Marvel Animation Age would like to thank Josh Fine for his participation in this Q & A!

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